Alberta Whittle's Caribbean Gothic
By Daniella Rose King

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) by Jean Rhys has been playing on Alberta Whittle's mind for some time. Rhys' questions around Caribbean Gothic and the porous boundaries between place and psyche, beauty and malaise resonate across Alberta's solo exhibition at The Modern Institute, titled *"Even in the most beautiful place in the world, our breath can falter"*. This title alludes to the challenges of breathing in a world that is ever toxifying. It also calls to mind the queasy (breathless, even) feeling that underscores the dislocation of diaspora and racialization; those who are always out of place. Employing hues reminiscent of Caribbean vistas, Alberta suggests a landscape brimming with this mix of dread and beauty. Painting herself into the environment, concealed by a host of spectral figures and forms, she constructs her own sublime and ambiguous geography.

In her final novel, Rhys brings to life Antoinette, the 'madwoman' in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).[1] *Wide Sargasso Sea* charts Antoinette's life in post-emancipation Jamaica as a 'white cockroach' before being sold into a marriage with Mr. Rochester that is at first intoxicatingly passionate but quickly sours into misery and mental illness at the hands of his avarice and indifference.[2] Many of the works in the exhibition borrow their titles from the novel, most notably the tragic lines, 'You can pretend for a long time, but one day it all falls away and you are alone. We are alone in the most beautiful place in the world…'[3] Antoinette speaks these words prophetically; as a Jamaican-born white Creole she is destined to be exiled and othered; first as a relic of the plantocracy and later as a 'demon', 'vampire' and 'madwoman' locked in the attic in England.

Wide Sargasso Sea sits within the Gothic genre, bringing into focus the Caribbean; the largely unseen geography that underwrites the genre so often associated with a British and American literary canon. Materially and aesthetically the colonies enriched the metropole,[4] just as Antoinette's wealth buttressed Mr. Rochester and later Jane Eyre. These entanglements, and how the Gothic and its auxiliary, *horror*, get attached to the Caribbean is central to Alberta's interest in the novel and Rhys' rendering of Antoinette. Rhys has been lauded for her complex female characters and in *Wide Sargasso Sea* she

details the extractive, paternalistic treatment of Antoinette, in many ways analogous to colonial plunder and control. Further, Rhys' luscious, haunted prose holds the dissonance of a Caribbean landscape that is both 'the most beautiful place in the world', as well as the inhospitable, perilous and monstrous setting for the settler-colonisers of the novel. In this vein, the Caribbean Gothic is shown to be bound to an enduring perception of the West Indies within the Western imagination as a source of danger and wildness. For Alberta, the sense 'that there's something toxic and corrupting in the air, perhaps a malady at its core' is the tension at the heart of the exhibition.

Obeah, magic, and hauntings form an uneasy backdrop to the machinations of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, alongside mention of 'Mounes Mors (The Dead Ones)' or zombies.[5] Viewed literally or rhetorically, the plantation transformed countless individuals into zombies, doomed to perform repetitive movements until their bodies gave out. How to even begin to measure the ramifications of humans turned into machines, souls into surplus value? Alberta asks the question: 'Who is this world actually made for? Who gets to thrive here?' In the face of the hard terrors of our history, how can one begin to 'visualise [a] kindness and softness?' Across the Caribbean archipelago, shaped and scarred by slavery, genocide, imperialism and climate crisis, could an embrace of the monstrous or the haunted be an emancipatory 're-wilding'?[6] Could it operate in the vein of Édouard Glissant's 'right to opacity', as a means of cultivating impenetrability?[7] Could this help us to *breathe without faltering*?

Across these newly created works spanning painting, tapestry, sculpture and sound, Alberta has staged and layered a series of imagined landscapes from across the Atlantic. They are linked to memories, places of significance and family photographs. The figures, predominantly women, watch from within and escape into landscapes made just for them. Complex patterns and symbols such as mandalas, sigils and *veves* mark the surface and interrupt the visual consumption of the paintings' female subjects. Operating as a means of camouflage and disguise, the forms employed by Alberta also reference religious and spiritual visual tools found in the syncretic aesthetic practices of Candomblé and Vodun. These floating patterns further emulate the intricate metal security bars that enclose windows and porches throughout the Caribbean. Patterns abound in these works from the canvas to the frames that feature decorative wooden fretwork echoing architectural

designs found on Barbadian Chattel houses. The work gives a glimpse of the rituals and codes of adornment that Alberta has amassed and conjured, from Barbadian and British visual cultures to the aesthetics of Masquerade and Caribbean carnival.

Alberta has described the powerful role the natural landscape has played in her artistic formation, recalling that, 'even as a little person, feeling creative, it was always about being in nature.' The natural surroundings take centre stage in her paintings, often encroaching onto the subjects. The palette of Alberta's exhibition, a riot of pinks, reds, oranges and greens, conjure the fiery sunsets and moody dawns of the Caribbean. Jean Rhys imagines Mr. Rochester's inner monologue announcing that 'Everything is too much…Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger.'[8] He's not wrong. The colours are 'too much', they require a recalibration from the dreary dim light of the seasons in the (far) Northern hemisphere. For Mr. Rochester, all those who populate the Caribbean landscape are a 'stranger' to him. Embracing this strangeness alongside nature, as Glissant too embraced the opacity of nature and its inherent mystery and inhospitality, Alberta's paintings enact a speculative geography that is strange and wild. This is where our diasporic community has taken root and in Sylvia Wynter and Kamau Brathwaite's words *indigenized*. This grounding and planting against the odds, over time constitutes a mythology of the Caribbean, beyond colonialism and bondage. For Alberta this vision precedes 'plantations and sugar cane', encompassing the unsolved mysteries of the land and their insurmountable call to be re-wilded.

[1] In Brontë's novel the character is known as Bertha Antoinetta Mason.
[2] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), p. 20.
[3] Rhys, p. 118.
[4] It was Edward Said who famously said that 'imperialism and the novel, fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other.' Edward W. Said, 'Narrative and Social Space', *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1993), p. 71.
[5] Rhys, p. 98.
[6] Alberta Whittle, in conversation with Sekai Machache, Glasgow, 17 August 2023.
[7] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 190.
[8] Rhys, p. 63.

Unless otherwise cited, all quotations attributed to Alberta Whittle are from a conversation with the author.